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Iraq's Sunni Strategy Collapses in Ramadi Rout

By TIM ARANGO

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Iraqi soldiers firing at Islamic State positions in the Garma district as clashes continued in Anbar Province on Tuesday.

More than a thousand Iraqi Sunni fighters stood at attention, dressed in camouflage but holding no weapons, as the tribal leader began exhorting them to fiercely battle the militants of the Islamic State, taking up rhetoric tinged with Arab notions of vengeance.

“It is now time for revenge for our martyrs,” said the sheikh, Falih al-Essawi, who was dressed in a military uniform. He checked off the destruction wrought in their lands by the Islamic State, or, as he called them, “the rats of ISIS”: 25,000 homes leveled, he said, bridges burned, the economy devastated.

He and other speakers made an explicit plea to the Shiite prime minister in Baghdad, Haider al-Abadi: Arm and support our men, and we will take the fight ourselves to the Islamic State.

That event was 11 days ago at a military base here in Amiriyat Falluja, one of the last cities of Anbar Province in government hands. It was billed as the beginning of a government program to arm and train local Sunni tribesmen to battle the Sunni extremists of the Islamic State — a critical gesture to show that Shiite and Sunni Iraqis could unite in the fight, and to put Sunni residents at ease with defenders from their communities.



Displaced Iraqi Sunnis, who fled the violence in the city of Ramadi, arrived at the outskirts of Baghdad on Tuesday.

Now, the fall of Anbar’s capital, Ramadi, to the Islamic State has illustrated the failure of that strategy.

The government’s effort to foster Sunni fighters, always a seemingly halfhearted program, now feels almost incidental as thousands of Shiite militiamen flood into Anbar to take up the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

A ceremony for a group of Sunni tribal fighters stationed at a base in Habbaniya, a lakeside town in Anbar, to receive new American-supplied weapons had been scheduled for Monday but was canceled because of the Ramadi crisis. Instead, nearly 3,000 Shiite militiamen arrived at the outpost.

The collapse of Anbar has also set in sharp relief the continuing tragedy of Iraq’s Sunnis, beginning with the American invasion in 2003, which almost instantly upended the old social order of Sunni prominence. With the majority Shiites thrust into power, the Sunnis were

sidelined, many banished from public life for good because of their ties to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

Some of those Sunnis joined the insurgency, and many fight today for the Islamic State. Other Sunnis boycotted elections. A great number even deny the demographic fact that they are a minority in Iraq.

Most, though, wanted to get on with their lives and find a place within the new order.

Now, with the rise of the Islamic State, that has become nearly impossible. The Sunni militants of the Islamic State have declared war on those they consider apostates — Shiites, Christians, Yazidis — but it is Iraq's Sunni Arabs who have arguably suffered the most.



As Islamic State militants seized control of Ramadi in recent days, their rampage was as grim as it was familiar. Through mosque loudspeakers, they assured the remaining civilians that they would provide them with food and security, and open roads and bridges that had been closed. Those promises belied what actually came with their arrival: vast destruction, summary killings of those believed to be sympathetic to the government — militants went door to door with lists of names — and the displacement of thousands of people.

The militants immediately opened two Shariah, or Islamic law, courts in Ramadi, according to an official, and freed prisoners who had been held in the city by Iraq's counterterrorism forces.

The failure of Mr. Abadi to marshal a Sunni-led force to save the city has deepened the grievances of some Sunnis toward the central government that began with the leadership of the former prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki.

“Abadi is a liar just like Maliki,” said Subhi al-Khaliani, a retiree in Diyala Province. “He won’t arm the Sunnis, but will weaken them instead.”

Bilal al-Dulaimi, 45, who works as a nurse in Diyala, said, “Sunnis are the prisoners of ISIS, which beheads tens of them daily.” He added, “The Sunni future is unknown and painful.”

Even Sunni officials in Anbar Province have called on Mr. Abadi to send in the Shiite militias, some of them linked with Iran, to help fight the Islamic State. But many citizens of Anbar are fearful, given the Shiite armed groups’ role in sectarian atrocities of the past decade.

“The Shiite militias going to Anbar are a nongovernmental force; they are undisciplined and uncontrolled, and even the prime minister doesn’t control these militias,” said Amir Abdul, a 38-year-old resident of Anbar. “These militias are directly connected to Iran.”



Sunni volunteers for the fight against the Islamic State during their first training session at a military base in Amiriyat Falluja, one of the last cities of Anbar Province in government hands.

Nearly three million Iraqis are now displaced, according to the United Nations, a level not seen since the height of Iraq’s sectarian civil war in 2006 and 2007. Then, many Iraqis fled to Syria. But with Syria convulsed by its own civil war, Iraqis on the run from the Islamic State have few safe places to go. Nearly 85 percent of the displaced are Sunnis, according to a United Nations official.

The United Nations, in a statement released Monday, warned that the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Sunni areas had almost overwhelmed it. “The U.N. is rushing assistance to help people fleeing Ramadi, but funds are running out and stocks are almost done,” the statement said.

Lise Grande, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, said in the statement: “Nothing is more important right now than helping people fleeing Ramadi. They are in trouble, and we need to do everything possible to help them. Thousands of people had to sleep in the open because they don’t have places to stay. We would be able to do much more if we had the funding.”

The displacement crisis has been made worse by Iraq's sectarian divisions. Civilians fleeing Anbar have often been treated almost as foreign citizens when they arrive at the gates of Baghdad. Many are denied entry, especially young men, because the government considers them a security threat. After an influx of Ramadi residents several weeks ago, several car bombs struck Baghdad — a common occurrence at any time — and government officials blamed the displaced people.

Some of the displaced Sunnis have been allowed into the capital, but many have had their identification cards confiscated and have been housed in Sunni mosques, prevented from moving freely around the city.

Many Iraqi Sunni leaders were either killed — especially tribal leaders who once fought alongside the Americans against Al Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor group to the Islamic State — or pushed into exile under the previous government of Mr. Maliki. As a result, many Sunnis today feel they have no legitimate leaders, partly because so many were unable to vote in last year's elections because of poor security.

The Sunni leaders who have remained in Baghdad are openly mocked as “Green Zone politicians,” with only a tenuous connection to any constituency and little influence that extends beyond their offices and homes in the fortified government center of the capital.

Rafe al-Essawi, a Sunni from Anbar who was Iraq's finance minister under Mr. Maliki, left the country in 2013 under threat of arrest on terrorism charges that Western diplomats said were false.

At the Brookings Institution in Washington, Mr. Essawi spoke recently about the pressures the Sunnis faced under Mr. Maliki's government, including mass detentions and trumped-up terrorism charges, and the continuing struggles to incorporate Sunnis into the security forces.

This environment, he said, “makes the society of Sunnis ask the question: Is it justifiable to be part of the political process? Are we part of Iraq? If the answer is yes, the government should be an Iraqi-inclusive government for all Iraqis.”